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ABSTRACT

This document examines the Learning Communities Program (LCP) at Cerritos College, California. The author contends that, although some innovations work and others do not, the evaluation process is in itself an innovation and is essential to the innovation development cycle. Understanding and reporting program outcomes subsequently advances the development and acceptance of theory and practice. The author's evaluation of the LCP began with the specification of initial questions designed to address the following four program objectives: (1) expand and design student activities and services to increase student retention, persistence, and success; (2) increase student involvement with activities and services; (3) improve faculty involvement with students and learning communities; and (4) increase campus commitment to learning communities. The questions were open-ended. The evaluation was conducted in spring 2001; a total of 531 students were enrolled in learning communities in 2000-2001. Noteworthy findings of the evaluation are as follows: (1) 90% of the students in the LCP were from underrepresented groups; (2) the majority of students in LCP intended to transfer to earn a B.A. degree; (3) success rates in the learning communities were better than comparable courses in more than half of the 48 cases observed. (Author/NB)

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Viewing Evaluation as Innovation

Jan Connal, Ph.D.

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Preface

Learning Communities Program Description
Cerritos College

Overview

Learning Communities involve faculty working together to restructure curriculum. The intent behind such restructuring is to help students:

(1) make intellectual connections between two subjects
(2) make connections with each other
(3) make connections with the campus
(4) make connections with their instructors

The intents are grounded in retention theory, which reveals that students who drop out of school are those who feel disconnected on each of these fronts.

The criteria that characterize a learning community are:

(1) Common cohort of students
(2) Interdisciplinary structure
(3) Theme based
(4) Discipline integration via aligned lectures, mutual assignments, aligned course objectives, etc.

Features

- Students volunteer to join this program.

- All those who volunteer for the program are accepted, provided they fulfill prerequisite requirements. (These requirements vary from course to course.)

- The number of students participating in a team course depends on the course cap. For example, Speech courses have a cap of 25-30 students, yet Political Science courses often have a cap of 60 students. If two such courses are paired, the department deans and instructors negotiate the learning communities cap. As an example, a speech class might be willing to accept 40 students instead of 30, while a Political Science class might be willing to bring the number of students down from 60 to 40.

Learning Communities courses at Cerritos College are taught in one of two ways: (1) paired (2) in teams.

(1) Paired means courses are taught by two instructors from different disciplines independently, yet coordinated. Coordinated meaning the instructors work

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together to integrate and link both their lectures and course assignments. Oftentimes, instructors will write a mutual syllabus and coordinate their lectures throughout the semester to demonstrate to the students how the two disciplines (i.e. courses) are related to each other. In addition, each instructor would have the same students at different times, and the courses are typically scheduled back-to-back (e.g., Speech 9:00-10:00, Political Science 10:00-11:00).

(2) Team-taught courses are those in which both instructors are in the class at the same time teaching the same group of students through both class meeting times (e.g. Speech 9:00-10:00, Political Science 10:00-11:00, with both instructors and students in the class together from 9:00-11:00.)

Viewing Evaluation as Innovation

Learning Communities Program Evaluation
Cerritos College
Spring 2001

by
Jan Connal, Ph.D.

Introduction

Like many institutions of higher education, Cerritos College maintains a culture of instructional innovation. Faculty take great pride in the academic responsibility for instructional innovation. Faculty are encouraged and expected to develop programs, services and professional skills. The institution supports instructional innovation with limited professional and program development funds. Substantial development, however, is usually funded by categorical grants that require more formal evaluation and accountability.

As with any creative endeavor, some innovations "work" while others do not. At times the innovation development process may appear to critics as wasting time and money. This would be true if the development efforts were not evaluated to determine positive outcomes. Unfortunately, all too few innovations are credibly evaluated and reported.

It is my assertion that evaluation is itself an innovation and essential to the innovation development cycle. Genuine innovation does not happen apart from evaluation. Unfortunately, faculty are more often consumed with the development and application of an innovation, rather than the formal evaluation of it. Consequently, faculty risk missing the full promise of instructional innovation and leave critics' claims unanswered.

Evaluation, if done well, leads to a more complete understanding of the effects of innovation. Understanding and reporting program outcomes subsequently advances the development and acceptance of theory and practice.

Program Evaluation Methodologies

A variety of methods can be used to evaluate program outcomes. Much has been written elsewhere about different models of program evaluation. For a thorough treatment of this topic I refer you to, among others, *Educational Evaluation: Theory and Practice* by Worthen and Sanders. As a means of introducing the Learning Communities Program evaluation at Cerritos College, however, I will briefly review two broad categories of methods and measurements: quantitative and qualitative.

The most commonly used methods in program evaluation are those that generate quantitative data like student success and retention rates. Program evaluations often employ surveys of students and faculty to assess satisfaction with the program. Some surveys address more behavioral measures like how frequently students visit the instructor during office hours. In general, quantitative data is favored and accepted as being more characteristic of objective, concrete research.

The generation of qualitative data, on the other hand, is rare in program evaluation. Several reasons exist for this paucity. The majority of educational researchers are trained in quantitative methods. This is true as well for the educational administrators making decisions about programs. Researchers and decision-makers, alike, generally favor using methods they know best. The generation of qualitative data requires more time and effort, and hence more money. Conducting focus groups, interviews and field studies certainly yield a depth of information but at a high cost. And conclusions drawn from qualitative research are often criticized as being too subjective, unlike concrete quantitative research.

Although it may seem that quantitative and qualitative methods are incompatible, I propose along with other practioners that the two methods can and should be combined. Jackson's (1999) evolutionary research model combines the methods in a series of iterative processes. This model assumes 1) research is ongoing, that theory development is continuous; 2) there is need to think both deductively and inductively at any given point in time, that the evaluation process goes back and forth; 3) the research question(s) determines which approach is appropriate; 4) subsequent questions and direction may necessitate a new method; 5) quantitative and qualitative research should provide a convergence of findings; and 6) by combining qualitative and quantitative methods the researcher should find complimentary methodological solutions.

It is certainly more complex to develop and conduct an innovative evaluation such as suggested by Jackson's model above. But to fully understand and assess the outcomes of an instructional innovation like the Cerritos College Learning Communities Program, nothing short of an evaluation innovation would suffice.

Cerritos College Learning Communities Program Evaluation

The evaluation of the Learning Communities Program at Cerritos College has evolved over time. And, as a result, much has been learned about instructional innovation, student learning and evaluation itself. A fundamental lesson learned was that it is not enough to know what worked, we must understand why the innovation works. The purpose of this paper is to share the Cerritos College evaluation experience. Hopefully, this experience will inspire others to view evaluation as an innovation to more fully understand how and why learning communities work (or don't work).

The evaluation of the Learning Communities Program began with the specification of initial questions. The questions were generated to address four program objectives.

Objective 1: Expand and design student activities and services to increase student retention, persistence and success.

1. Which activities or services were expanded and developed?
2. How many students were informed?
3. How many students used the services and activities?
4. Were students who used the services more successful than those who didn't?
5. Did students who used services acquire more knowledge about
    a. Commitment to education?
    b. Clear educational purpose?
    c. Personal responsibility?
    d. Time management?
    e. Goal setting?
    f. Defining purpose?
    g. Understanding consequences of probation?
6. Did students use more services?
7. Were students more informed of services available?
8. Were contacts made with first-time students? Did they use services offered?
9. Were contacts made with probation students? Did they use services offered?

Objective 2: Increase student involvement with activities and services.

1. Was a new semester celebration held? How many students attended?
2. Were faculty-student mixers held? How many were involved?
3. Did participating students feel more able to interact with instructors?
4. Did instructors tell students to use services provided to them?
5. Did instructors speak to students outside of class?
6. Were learning activities provided which increased student self-awareness and commitment?
7. Did the activities foster student involvement and commitment?
8. Were class visits made? By whom? Which classes?

Objective 3: Improve faculty involvement with students and learning communities.

1. Were orientation sessions held for faculty?
2. How many attended?
3. What did faculty learn from the orientation?
4. Were faculty who attended more involved as a result?

Objective 4: Increase campus commitment to Learning Communities.

1. Were monthly workshops held to highlight student support services?
2. Were classroom presentations made?
3. Did faculty encourage students to use services?
4. Did students get an orientation to the Library?
5. Did students get an orientation to the LAP?
6. Did students use these services as a result of the orientations?

Upon discussing how to proceed with the evaluation it was agreed to move away from the initial questions, those that could be answered 'yes' or 'no,' in favor of why and how questions. Prior to the current evaluation retention rates, success rates and satisfaction surveys had been routinely collected and compared. Program staff knew the status of the program but needed to know more in order to make program improvements. It was agreed that a more full understanding of the program was needed and a fresh approach was in order. The time was right to introduce the concept of a *progressive evaluation innovation*.

The current evaluation was conducted Spring, 2001 using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The multi-method approach was used to better understand the true effects of Learning Communities on students and faculty. The current evaluation was particularly interested in the impact of student

support and guidance provided to the learning communities. The following information gathering techniques were included in the multi-method evaluation:

1. Success rates of students from Learning Community (LC) courses and comparable Non-Learning Community (NLC) courses.
2. Student surveys of LC and NLC course drop-outs.
3. Student surveys in LC's, comparing the course beginning (Time 1) to the end of term (Time 2).
4. LC student focus groups.
5. LC student and faculty interviews.
6. LC and NLC classroom observations and ethnographies.
7. LC Retention Counselor interview.

The Learning Communities Program at Cerritos College included 11 combinations in Fall 2000 and another 12 in Spring 2001. A total of 531 students were enrolled in Learning Communities in 2000-2001. Nearly 20 retention and academic support workshops were available to students in the Program.

The evaluation project was designed and coordinated by Jan Connal, Ph.D. The team of researchers involved in the multi-method evaluation included Cerritos College colleagues Danielle Carney, Tanisha Peoples, Mary Kay Toumajian, Dora Lee, Karen Pinaud and Steve Wong.

Noteworthy Findings

The evaluation innovation provided a wealth of information about the Learning Communities Program. The highlights are presented below.

Who enrolled and why?

- Ninety percent (90%) of the students in Learning Communities were from underrepresented groups; most were first generation, under prepared students.

- The majority of students in Learning Communities intend to transfer to a university to earn a Bachelor's degree.

- Learning Community students see themselves as highly motivated and goal-oriented.

- Students initially enrolled in Learning Communities because the courses were transferable and seemed interesting; students also thought they offered additional support.

- Students were more enthusiastic about enrolling in Learning Communities when they could understand the relationship between the courses.

Success Rates

- Success rates for the Learning Communities were better than comparison courses in more than half of the 48 cases observed.

- In 17 out of the 23 Learning Communities studied at least one of the courses in the Community had better-than-average success rates.

- Those who dropped the Learning Community gave academic difficulty as their reason more often than students dropping comparable courses.

Counseling and Guidance Effectiveness

- Learning Communities involving Counseling and Guidance courses with basic skills English courses had lower-than-average success rates (compared to traditional, stand-alone English courses).

- The shortened version of the Counseling and Guidance course (30 minutes each week) was not well received. Not enough time was available for

establishing community and connecting the content of the paired courses.

- Students gave relatively poor ratings to general Counseling Services; it seemed as though not enough counselor time was given to student needs. Students felt short-changed after waiting in lines.

- Faculty did not require student involvement in retention services or workshops.

- Some faculty encouraged students to attend the retention workshops. Most did not. Faculty received numerous notices about workshops but didn't want to take up limited class time discussing the workshops or referring students.

- Very few students (only 78) took advantage of the retention workshops. Learning Community students were more likely to use the Learning Assistance Program and Tutoring Services.

- The retention counselor services were not fully integrated into the Learning Community Program; More time and dialog with the faculty was needed for integration to occur.

Greater Sense of Community

- Students in the Learning Communities felt more connected to each other and their instructors; this was true even if the student eventually dropped out of the Learning Community.

- Students who persevered found the Learning Community to involve greater networking, collaboration, and teamwork than traditional courses.

- Learning Community students had greater interaction with the faculty and felt more involved, connected, and more comfortable asking questions. Faculty knew students by name which greatly enhanced student commitment.

- Learning Community faculty were more caring and offered more guidance than faculty in comparable courses.

- By the end of the Learning Community experience, students had moved away from their initial belief that success in the course depended on the instructor (presumably students began to take more personal responsibility for their success).

- Learning Community faculty gave more encouragement, engaged in more dialog and interaction with students than did their traditional counterparts.

Conclusions about the Cerritos College Learning Communities Program

The evaluation of the Learning Communities Program at Cerritos College revealed a great deal about its students, faculty, program and evaluation practices. Two major points will serve as my conclusion: the mixed success of the Program and the lack of integration of retention services.

Mixed Success within the Program. The Learning Communities Program is clearly a success in establishing a sense of community among its participants. Learning Community course success rates, however, were only slightly higher than comparable courses.

Why wouldn't course success rates be higher? A possible answer may lie in the differences between student and faculty expectations. Given the fact that students who enrolled in Learning Communities courses were more often under prepared, 1st generation college students, it is possible that, despite their high motivation and aspirations, they lacked the role models and understanding of the educational system and expectations necessary for success. Many enrolled in the Learning

Community because courses were transferable (reflecting high aspirations) and appeared to offer more support than traditional courses (reflecting a desire/need for additional help). Couple this with the fact that Learning Communities faculty worked at creating embellished curriculum and activities which may have resulted in rigorous academic standards well beyond the reach of many of the students. In fact, a fair number of students reported not seeing the connection between the courses in the Learning Community and those who dropped out gave reasons of academic difficulty. Better monitoring of the expectations of students and their the mastery of connected course content may lead to greater success in the Learning Communities.

Lack of Integration of Retention Services. There also appeared to be a mismatch between students' need for and use of retention services. Given the fact that Learning Communities students are often under prepared and lack an understanding about succeeding in college, it would appear students need and want additional help to succeed in the Program. Very few students, however, attended the workshops provided. It was not for a lack of effort on the part of the Retention Counselor, however. Although faculty were inundated with flyers, e-mails, and voice-mail, relatively few made time to discuss the services with students. Fewer still required student participation in the workshops. According to the Retention Counselor, retention services were seen as "add-ons" and not integral to the Learning Communities Program. Perhaps more needs to be done to illustrate the need and value of retention services.

Recommendations for Future Evaluations

As with any innovation there are recommendations for improvement. In the context of evaluating learning communities, I have the following to offer:

1. Obtain an early commitment from Learning Community faculty to participate in qualitative information gathering efforts. The evaluation is critical to improving the program.

2. Convince Learning Community faculty to use weekly classroom assessment techniques to monitor the instructional process and the formation of 'community.'

3. Convince Learning Community faculty to require their students to develop learning portfolios which can later be used to assess student learning along with course grades.

4. Evaluate the program after it is known to be sufficiently well implemented.

5. Evaluate the program over time, following up on students to determine lasting effects.

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